

**A BRIEF NOTICE OF SOME
RECENT
RESEARCHES RESPECTING
DANTE ALIGHIERI**

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THOMAS JOHN DE MAZZINGHI

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de
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PREFATORY REMARKS.

SOME years ago the attention of the writer of the following pages was directed to the zealous care with which every fact and detail tending to throw light upon the life and works of Dante was collected by the living Literati of Germany and France. In seeking information upon the subject, he in vain turned for assistance to the periodical or permanent Literature of this country. He found little that was calculated to explain or illustrate the movement that was taking place,—no notice of the labours of Fraticelli, Troya, Tommaseo or Balbo,—no account of Professor Witte's interesting publication, "Dantis Aligherii Epistolæ quæ extant," or of the important discovery of additional letters and sonnets made by the same erudite German scholar within the last few years. Dante's wife had here scarcely ceased to be regarded as a virago; his political and religious sentiments as hopeless problems.* His wanderings were ill ascertained—

* No question has more divided opinion than the consistency of Dante's conduct. Did his sentiments yield to the course of circumstances and accommodate themselves to events, in his own beautiful language,—

"Come la fronda che flette la cima
Nel transito del vento e poi si leva
Per la propria virtù che si sublima?"

Parad. XXVI, 85.

or did he, careless of men's thoughts, stand like the tower firm, that never inclines its head to the blast of the wind—

"Vien dietro a me e lasciar dir le genti
Sta come torre ferma, che non crolla
Giamaí la cima per soffiar de' venti;"

Purgat. V, 13.

The Poet's nature was obstinate and determined,—his trials many and severe, such as palsied the nerve, and occasioned the premature death. In the latter part of his life he appears to have been willing, upon any terms, not positively humiliating, to accept his recall from exile. Did his native resolution yield to or resist the pressure? Was he the flexible bough, or the unbending tower?

his prose works neglected—his minor poems little known, and their authenticity not discriminated. Some of the facts collected with much personal labour by the accurate and pains-taking Pelli, had even escaped the attention of Foscolo,—a writer, it is true, not unlikely to be repelled by a work so barren of imagination, however useful to the historian, as the “*Memorie per servire alla Vita di Dante.*”

The residence of Foscolo in this country, his different contributions to British Reviews, as well as his fervent and persuasive eloquence, had undoubtedly rendered the subject in some degree attractive even to the English reader, still many years have elapsed since death closed the feverish career of that distinguished scholar: many important discoveries have since been made. Under these circumstances it occurred to the writer, that he might usefully draw up a brief account of what was being done upon the subject, indicating, as he proceeded, the sources from which more ample information might be obtained.*

Like the “*Phædrus*,” the principal Allegory of the “*Commedia*” has been invested, at the will of its various expositors, with an ethical or political, a real or mystical meaning. A recent writer has sought to deal with Dante in the same mode in which the Athenian Philosopher was treated by the Alexandrian Platonists, whose aim it was, to use an expression of a late Oxford Professor, to convert a *religious philosophy* into a *philosophical religion*. It is sought to interpret Dante by Plato. But no intellect, however great, can be admitted as a measure of that of the sovereign Poet: or, if his opinions are to be squared to any favourite system, why not to that of Aristotle, to whose philosophy he would seem to have been more especially attached? In a well known passage of the “*Inferno*,” the Stagyrte, termed “*il maestro di*

* It is necessary to mention, in excuse of the positive tone in which some of the ensuing observations are conceived, that they appeared in a periodical publication.

color chi sanno," is the only one "tra la filosofica famiglia," represented as *seated*, the object of admiration and reverence to *all*. Socrates and Plato are placed nearest to him; but even they are not invested with the dignity and authority indicated by the sitting position. The composition of the earlier cantos of the Poem, in which the passage occurs, must, it is true, be referred to the former period of Dante's life, *i. e.* previous to his exile. The Theological portion of his great work was still unwritten. He is said to have devoted much time subsequently to study in the University of Paris; and it may be that he saw reason to change his relative estimate of the great lights of classical antiquity. We find him later in life explaining or apologizing for a passage in the "Timæus," alluding to the return of the soul to the ruling star of its destiny:—

"E forse sua sentenza è d' altra guisa
 Che la voce non suona, ed esser puote
 Con intenzion da non esser derisa."

Parad. IV. 55.

Had he been as familiar with the writings of Plato, as, through the medium of translations, or by means of the text itself, he certainly was with those of Aristotle, it is difficult to believe that he would not have placed the favourite philosopher of the fathers, the most Christian of Heathens, in his Paradise, by the side or in lieu of Trajan or Ripheus:

Plato, formed for meditation, not action,

"Similmente operando all' artista
 Ch' ha l' abito dell' arte e man che trema,"

Parad. XIII. 77,

has been termed rather the Craumer than the Luther of his age. Dante united the contemplative and the active virtues. They resemble each other, nevertheless, in many striking particulars. Both attached the very highest importance to the traditions of

antiquity, and the teaching of authority. Both attacked the abuses and corruptions of their age and country: the impassioned temperament of the Italian discovering itself by the constant adoption of the boldest strains of invective; the cautious disposition of the Greek venturing at most upon the polished irony, or merely leaving the wished-for conclusion to be drawn by the reader on a comparison of the arguments of a dialogue composed with a real or a specious impartiality. The actual position of these two great reformers was not dissimilar: placed in two republics,—the one subjected to popular, the other to aristocratical tyranny,—they were eye-witnesses to the mode in which it reacted upon society; they beheld a most flagitious state of public morals reflected back upon private life and aggravating its evils and its miseries. They looked for a remedy; and whilst the practical and energetic mind of the *Poet* beheld it in the appeal to the military force of a foreign, a titular Sovereign, the fancy of the *Philosopher* saw it in the realization of his ideal Republic. Possessing each abilities of the highest order, penetrating, comprehensive, catholic, how was it possible for either to sever the consideration of a political from that of a moral reform? how could either omit to insist upon that universal bond which cements the fabric of human society, and knits the brotherhood of man—that “civil” bond which the *Poet*, in a remarkable passage of his “Banquet,” (the *Convito*,) identified with and expressed by the emphatic designation—“Religione?”

Foscolo seems to have carefully collected in the course of his literary career, notices of various Dante MSS., not only in Italy, but in this country, and left at his death a descriptive account headed “Notizie e pareri diversi intorno a forse 200 Codici,” which appears in the recent edition published by Rolandi; but Foscolo left the Catalogue imperfect, and 66 alone are there given. He admits that the only MSS. which he had personally

examined, were those known as the Roscoe and Mazzuchellian. He affirmed that he had various readings in his possession, extracted for him from four other Codices in the libraries of Oxford, but omitted to give any detailed account of them until he had had an opportunity of confronting them with other celebrated copies in that University and in private libraries in England,—a task to which he appears to have looked forwards with horror. Singular enough, it would seem that he never had his attention directed to the MSS. preserved in the greatest and most famous library in this country—that of the British Museum. Of these the following is a brief enumeration.

1. Amongst the Lansdowne MSS. (1839) a folio copy of the "Commedia" on vellum, written towards the close of the 15th century, with a brief marginal description of the contents of each canto. It has on the first leaf two small portraits of the author, ill executed, and injured by the damp; it was purchased at Dr. Askew's sale for seven guineas, and is written in a legible hand by an apparently accurate copyist.

2. Amongst the Harleian MSS. (3459) a paper book in folio, to which more particular attention will presently be given.

3. Harl. MSS. (3460). A paper book, written in a kind of print hand, comprising the "Commedia." It is preceded *first* by some introductory verses, of which the following may serve as a sample:—

" Però che sia più frutto e più diletto
A quei che si diletta di sapere
De l' alta commedia vero intelletto," &c. &c. ;

and *secondly*, by the Prologue of Jacopo.

The first 20 Cantos of the "Inferno" are illustrated with rude drawings of the subjects in the margin. At the end of the entire poem the volume is stated to have been written "per me Mar-